

How to Use a Time-Out Wisely

Relationship experts, such as the creators of *Prepare Enrich*,* observe the consequences of emotion dysregulation and promote the use of Time-Outs in order to calm down, since it is unlikely that couples can think clearly in the heat of the moment. A Time-Out is biblical wisdom—it is a way to exercise self-control, to reflect and learn about yourself, and then to re-engage with greater understanding, rather than just reacting to what you are feeling in the moment. As someone providing counsel, you can help the couples talk through their plan for how they will initiate and/or honor request for a Time-Out.

Here are four steps you can teach to help couples use a Time-Out well:

1. Notice the body and the reaction when things start to get heated.

- The goal here is to help couples develop early detection of what’s happening in them before they can no longer come back from the brink. Start by teaching the couple that when emotions are triggered, they will usually be accompanied by some physical symptoms.
- Help them notice what happens when they are getting upset: *Do you hear your voice getting louder? Are you aware of your heart beating faster? Are tears welling up in your eyes? Are you feeling heat in your body or in your face?*
- People respond differently to tension. Help each person identify the particular ways they start to show that they are getting dysregulated.

2. Call “Time-Out!”

- Have couples agree and practice the language they will use for calling a Time-Out: “Time!” “I need a break.” “Can we resume in 30 minutes?”
 - Explain how it’s important to only call a Time-Out for yourself. Saying, “You need a Time-Out!” doesn’t work!
- Couples should agree in advance that they will honor their partner’s request for a Time-Out, without getting in one last word.
- On the other hand, the one calling the Time-Out needs to consistently honor the agreement to come back and talk about it. Otherwise, their partner will find it hard to honor the Time-Out request in the future, in fear that nothing will ever get resolved.

3. Use a cooldown period.

This is the most important step! Teach couples to use this cool down time wisely and intentionally. Ruminating about the faults of their partner will not help them regulate or prepare them to resume the conversation.

- **Tend to the body:**

- Breathe; stretch; go on a run.
- Take a shower; drink some ice water or a cup of hot tea; pet the dog.

- **Tend to the mind:**

- Journal about their feelings.
 - Consult a [feelings wheel](#). Try to name as many as apply, both positive and negative.
 - Besides “frustrated” and “angry,” can they identify the hurt and/or fearful feelings? We are so often overcome with secondary angry feelings we are not aware of the primary hurts.
- Journal about their thoughts:
 - Journal and identify what they wanted.
 - Journal what they've heard from their partner and appreciate what s/he might be desiring.

- **Tend to the heart:**

- Pour out their hearts to God.
 - Tell Jesus about their hurts.
 - Have them imagine Jesus seeing and hearing them.
 - How does Jesus understand their pain? When did he experience being misunderstood, misjudged, disregarded, disrespected?
 - How does his understanding provide comfort to them?
- What part of the conflict do they need to own and repent of to God and their partner?
- As they receive God’s grace and compassion, how does it enable them to extend grace to their partner?
- With deeper clarity from the process, identify the “I-statement” or request they actually want to express to their partner. You can use this Redeemer Counseling Toolkit, [Cultivating Connection Between Couples](#), for help teaching this skill.

4. Continue the conversation with vulnerability and curiosity rather than judgment.

- Explain to the couple that this is the time to offer a relationship repair by saying: “I’m sorry for interrupting you,” “I’m sorry for being unkind,” or “I’m sorry for getting defensive.”
 - There is usually something for both parties to own and repent of in every conflict.
 - When a partner apologizes, teach them to respond, “Thank you for saying that. It means a lot to me.”
- Be willing to listen to their partner’s point of view.
 - They can return to the conversation by asking, “Help me understand your perspective and why it is important to you.”
 - Have them practice reflecting what they are hearing the other say and validate their feelings. Before giving the counter-point, say, “I’m hearing you say (the point/reason) and it makes you feel (the feeling) and that makes sense.”
- After hearing the partner, teach them also to share their request or I-statement in vulnerable self-disclosure.
- Teach them to express gratitude for their partner’s willingness to use the Time-Out for self-reflection and for their desire for reconciliation.

Teaching couples how to use a Time-Out well can help them engage in healthy conversations and conflict resolution. On a deeper level, when couples are able to use their Time-Outs to process their feelings through a gospel lens, they will experience Jesus’ love and compassion which can transform their conflict into richer intimacy with God and one another.

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